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ABSTRACT

Psychologists starting their careers now have a bleaker view of the job market than those who started a decade or more ago. Ways in which new doctoral graduates in psychology can find their first jobs in professional psychology are explored in this paper. The focus is upon what reviewers and interviewers may look for in the curriculum vitae of applicants, the types of questions applicants may be asked during the interview, and other details of the job search. A step-by-step approach for the job hunt is presented. New graduates must be willing to go where the jobs are and should be proficient in using the internet to search for jobs. When responding to an ad, it is important that the vita be accurate, and not exceed two to five pages (i.e., do not send out a pre-internship vita). Reference letters should be written on agency/institution letterhead and cover letters should be brief; screening takes time, up to several months. Bring important documents, such as transcripts, to the interview and never be late for the appointment. Questions asked of the interviewer should deal with such matters as management philosophy and supervision style. (RJM)

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FINDING YOUR FIRST JOB IN PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY: THE PROCESS OF GETTING A CLINICAL PRACTICE POSITION

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Abstract

This paper, presented as a Symposium at the 105th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association in Chicago, Illinois, deals with how new doctoral graduates in psychology should approach finding their first jobs in professional psychology. The focus is upon what reviewers and interviewers may look for in the curriculum vita of applicants, the types of questions applicants may get asked in the interview setting, and what questions the applicants should ask of the prospective employers.

FINDING YOUR FIRST JOB IN PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY: THE PROCESS OF GETTING A CLINICAL PRACTICE POSITION

Introduction

Psychologists starting their careers now have a bleaker view of the job market than those who started a decade or more ago (Murray, 1996). Newly graduated Ph.D.'s struggle with major marketplace changes, such as downsizing in business and academe, restrictions by managed health care, and competition from non-doctoral practitioners (Murray, 1996). To cope with these changes, Kovacs (1996) advised that psychologists begin to rethink who we are and what we do in order to insure we can survive as a profession. However, before psychologists can accomplish Kovacs' recommendation, they must first find their initial employment situations. And, despite the negative changes in the job market, psychology continues to be a popular degree and is sought after at both the undergraduate and graduate levels of training (Clay, 1996). Those who continue to major in psychology still view it as having career potential, primarily in either the academic or the practice sectors.

For the new Ph.D. in psychology, achieving one's career potential can be disconcerting. While university training in psychology tends to focus on the acquisition of assessment, therapeutic, and research skills, much more attention is needed in the area of assisting students in the development of a professional persona and becoming marketable once they complete their terminal degrees (McCrea, 1992). Many students are uncertain as to how to prepare a curriculum vita and how to conduct a job search (Stoops & Falco, 1997). Academic and experiential deficits in the job hunting area lead to problems in not only what students should expect during the interview process, but what kind of questions they should ask when given the opportunity.

Job Searching Via the Internet

Job hunting in the clinical practice sector requires one to first determine in which state they would like to practice. It is sage advice for new graduates to go where the jobs are whenever possible, because it is much easier to find another job when you have a job than when you do not. Once you get some job experience, you can always look for a position closer to wherever home is for you.

In order to do the most effective job searching possible, one must know how to navigate the internet, not only for the job leads you may pick up, but the ability to utilize the internet will be proof to prospective employers that you are "computer literate". Many businesses and prospective employers are starting to realize the potential of the World-Wide-Web and will pay more attention to the updating their web site than with their involvement with the print media. Using the internet can result in learning of available positions sooner than they might be listed in professional publications or newspapers.

If you are a regular user of the internet, you can use one of several different "search engines" such as "*YAHOO*" (**http://www.yahoo.com**) [or, "*Excite*" (**http://www.excite.com**); "*AltaVista*" (**http://www.altavista.com**)]. If using "*YAHOO*", go into the "*Business & Economy*" main heading, then select the "*Employment*" heading, and finally, select the "*Jobs*" heading. Once there, you will find approximately 550 different web sites listing jobs. If you are looking for a position in a certain city, you will find these search engines will allow you to do on-line reading of the classified ad sections of many different newspapers around the country.

With the proliferative explosion of activity via the internet, it is now possible to do a job search from the comfort of one's personal computer. There are a number of World-Wide-Web sites that can be searched for both clinical and academic positions, with some electronic addresses furnished for you below. You must type

the address into the *Location* box on the web-browser system you are using. The addresses are case-specific, meaning you must type the "address" exactly as it appears: 1) *The Chronicle of Higher Education* , a weekly newspaper dealing with university and college articles, and has an extensive listing of jobs in each issue (**http://chronicle.merit.edu/.ads/.links.html**); 2) *Employment Opportunities and Resume Postings*, listing links to a number of university personnel department servers (**http://galaxy.einet.net/GJ/employment.html**); 3) *The Catapult Job Web*, job links listed by professional fields (**http://www.jobweb.org/catapult/jfield.htm**); 4) *Jobs*, which lists more university personnel department server links (**http://agentinfo.tamu.edu/jobs.html**); 5) *Med Search America*, listing jobs in the health care field across the United States (**http://www.medsearch.com/**); 6) *National Business Employment Weekly* (**http://www.occ.com/occ/NBEW/NBEW01.html**); 7) *American Counseling Association* (**http://www.counseling.org**) and, of course, 8) *American Psychological Association* (**http://www.apa.org**).

Developing a Curriculum Vita

Once an interesting position is found, your curriculum vita should be developed. As a recruiter of psychologists, the foremost new graduate mistake is to send out a variation of the *pre-internship* vita. The pre-internship style vita can go 12 pages or more and most of the information is superfluous. It is necessary to cut the vita in length and to format the information in the order of importance to the reader(s). I would also add that you follow the position listing directions **to the letter** when submitting a vita to a prospective employer. Many will ask for a cover letter, a vita, and a specified number of professional references. Submit **exactly** what is asked for: no more; and no less. Some academic positions may ask you to include a written essay on a specific topic in your cover letter. For example, a couple years ago, Marquette University was looking for faculty for

their new Counseling Psychology program. Respondents were asked to include a paragraph in their cover letter as to the role counseling psychology would play in the 21st Century. More often than not, you will not be required to provide any written essay with your vita.

While curriculum vita construction is a whole other topic, the best vita will contain the following sections: 1) *statement of objectives*; 2) *educational background*; 3) *licenses/certification*; 4) *professional experience*, with a slight amount of detail as to specific duties you had in the position; 5) *teaching experience* (if any); 6) *publications/presentations* (if any); and 7) *honors/ achievements/organizations*. Make sure that everything in your vita is spelled correctly, and that you have not overly embellished or grossly inflated any of your job titles or job details. It is too easy these days for employers to verify whether the information in your vita is accurate.

For most clinical practice positions, one should be able to get by with a two page minimum, or three page vita at somewhere between a 12- or 14-pitch font (for the sake of comparison, this paper has been written in a Times New Roman 14-pitch font). For most academic positions, plan on writing a bit more, and since many academic positions are looking for candidates with either active and funded research programs, as well as more in the way of publications and presentations, it would not be surprising to see such a vita go up to five pages or more, in addition to many academic positions asking an applicant to send copies of representative publications.

If the vita is too long, as is the case with most of the pre-internship variety, it will be difficult to sustain the reviewers' interest. Many clinical practice positions can get between 30 and 60 vitae submitted and either an individual or a team may review all of these to narrow down the field of candidates. The most important thing to remember where vita review is concerned is chances are strong the

reviewer will be doing the same kind of work duties as in the position listing. And for many practitioners, time is at a premium. If applying to a group clinical practice, the practitioner(s) may be giving up either free time, or billable time, in order to review your application materials. Therefore, the more direct and organized your vita is, the higher it may end up rating out during the initial screening phase.

The Cover Letter

You are advised to keep cover letters short, unless the position listing calls for you to write a small essay in the letter. The reason you need to keep cover letters short is because your vita may be going to a central collection point, such as a "personnel" or "human resources" department. In large institutions/agencies, it is not uncommon for human resources to only pass along the vita to the department listing the position vacancy. Our institution has a central collection point and the individual in that position keeps cover letters only to compile an address database from which to send out rejection letters. After that, the cover letters are thrown away. During an interview two years ago, a prospective candidate made references to a five page cover letter he had written when asked to elaborate upon something in his 19 page vita. After the third reference to the cover letter, I had to tell him no one read his cover letter because those were not given to us. Do not put your heart and soul into a cover letter that might never be read.

Believe it or not, a cover letter can be done in just two paragraphs. The first paragraph should indicate what materials you are submitting, in response to your seeing a job listing (and indicate exactly where you saw this listing, especially if it was seen on the internet, as employers like to know their advertising works), and that you would like to be formally considered for the position. The second paragraph should indicate the reader can contact you if any additional information is needed to assess your eligibility and/or candidacy for the position, and that the

reader may feel free to contact your references for more information, or to verify the authenticity of their letters.

Use Your References Wisely

As for your references, ask them if they would be willing to write letters for you in a "To Whom it May Concern" format that you can send out with your job application materials. Let your references know you will be applying for a large number of jobs and your intent is to minimize the impact upon them in having to provide an original reference letter for you every time you apply for a job. You should only send copies of your original reference letters, saving the originals for possible future inspection during an interview. Some prospective employers may require you to submit an original reference letter to them. This can become problematic because most of the work many have done to this point has been to accumulate good references. A prospective employer may be asked if they would be willing to return references or transcripts to you if you do not become a "finalist" for the position. Many places should be able to honor such a request.

With respect to references, only use university professors and internship supervisors until you get your first professional job. After that, quickly phase your university contacts out. Your primary work supervisor will be all that another prospective employer will be interested in contacting. In addition, your references should use official letterhead of their agency/institution, and hopefully will use different fonts and pitch in word processing their letters. Not long ago, we had an applicant for a position not get to the interview stage because the references were all typed either on the same typewriter, or word processed in the same font and pitch. None of the letterheads were "official", and in fact, they looked to have been computer generated, as each was patterned identically. If your references appear "suspicious" to a reviewer, so might other information in your application materials.

The Screening and Selection Process: A Test of Patience

The most frustrating aspect of job searching is sending a vita somewhere, then sitting and waiting to see what happens. The wait can seem interminable. Private institutions and agencies generally respond quicker to job applications and will screen applicants, interview them, and make an offer to someone much sooner than what one should expect if applying to a state institution or agency. Many state agencies are unable to even list a position as available until such time that the incumbent leaves it. State agencies tend to allow for between four and six weeks for applicants to submit their materials. If a human resources or personnel department is used as the drop point for the applications, someone in human resources will do an initial screening to make sure all applicants meet the minimum educational, experiential, and certification requirements as listed in the position announcement. This can take several weeks for someone to do. Those not meeting minimum requirements will get a rejection letter from the personnel/human resources department. Those meeting all requirements in the position announcement will have their materials forwarded to the department looking to hire someone. Once the material arrives to the department, it can take up to another month or more before all members of the screening committee are able to review all the materials just to begin the initial screening.

Typically institutions or agencies using screening committees to review the applications to narrow the candidate pool to around 10% of the total applicants, and that 10% will likely invited to a formal interview. The next step will be to do a reference check on those who make it to the interview stage. It should not come as a surprise that by the time the initial review, initial screening, getting down to a list of finalists, and reference checks are done, up to four months or more, can pass between your submitting an application and either getting a call to arrange an interview, or receiving a rejection letter.

What to Bring to an Interview

There are some essential things for to bring to an interview so that you are ready for every eventuality. All of these items can be contained in a standard expanding file folder that you can use like a mini-briefcase. This type of folder can be bought at any office supply or university bookstore, and they come in two sizes: 1.875 inches and 3.5 inches deep. Inside of this expanding file, include the following:

1) *Several clean copies of your curriculum vita* - just in case they are needed.
2) *Official copies of any and all college transcripts* - for review, if needed, and make sure the Registrar's seal is clearly visible/evident.
3) *Original letters of reference* - for review to attest to their authenticity. If you work in a university setting and have gotten any cards or letters of appreciation from student clients, make xerox copies of those and black out the client last name for confidentiality purposes.
4) If you worked in preparing *any special documents or projects*, such as "Policies & Procedures", "Scope of Care"; or were have any professional publications other than your dissertation, etc., bring copies of those items.
5) If you have given *any presentations*, especially anything you have done at an American Psychological Association convention, bring copies of those too.
6) Any *evaluations of your work performance* either as an intern, or in a professional capacity.
7) *A writing tablet*. The paper may be needed for you to

take notes during the interview as to salient aspects of the position, etc., however, make sure you ask if it is all right with the interviewer(s) if you to take some brief notes.

All of these items should fit neatly into your expanding file folder. Be sure to organize the file folder in such a way that you can find what you are looking for in a matter of seconds.

Above all else, **do not show up late for an interview** !! Make every effort to know where you need to be ahead of time and show up between ten and fifteen minutes early, if possible.

Personal Appearance

This is one area that I do not typically like to address, having been a former "longhair" during the 1960's ! I am all for as much individuality as the next person. But, you need to remember the people most likely to hire you may look something like me. Or, they will be much taller, thinner, and more chic ! You may have to set your individuality aside temporarily in order to get your first professional position. Therefore, you will have to look the part if invited for an interview, and you cannot afford to have a *bad hair day* ! Men.....ditch the earring(s), polish your shoes, and make sure there is no sideways crease in your pants from being on a hanger too long.....! Women, disguise any "body art", and no more than two earrings in each ear !

What an Interviewer Might Ask You

You may find the interview experience to be longer, more structured, and more focused on behavior than it was in the past. The interview experience is also likely to involve several interviewers. You should be prepared to meet between three and six interviewers, either separately, or in a panel. The interviewers will have already reviewed your vita long before you arrive for an interview. Many

interviews may typically open up the interview in a more projective fashion, asking applicants to "*Tell us something about yourself that is not on your vita*". This line of questioning tends to throw many new graduates out-of-synch. Other projective questions applicants may be asked are, "*What do you see as your greatest strength and greatest liability ?*", and, "*If I called your present supervisor about you, what would I be told ?*". My own favorite question to use is, "*Medical scientists are going to announce a breakthrough discovery....a pill that will cure all physical and emotional ills. As of midnight tonight, the practice of psychology will cease. What will you look back on as your most significant achievement while you were in the field ?*"

Many interview candidates are just not ready for this kind of questioning. It is advised that you realistically assess what your greatest strength and liability is and to possibly have both of these being the same thing. For example, a person could say their strongest point is their "dedication to duty", for obvious reasons. However, this could also be used as the liability, telling the interviewer your dedication is such that you may need to be told when to go home, or when to take time off work. The strength cannot be too strong, and the liability cannot be so bad that someone questions why they would hire you. With respect to being asked what your present supervisor would say about you, indicate that you aren't sure what s/he would say right this moment, but present a copy of your last written performance evaluation to the interviewer to show what the supervisor wrote about you, which is why bringing a copy of a recent performance evaluation in your expanding file folder is strongly advised.

However, be prepared for interviewers to pose a series of predetermined questions designed to discover if you have the skills and necessary characteristics to succeed in the position. This line of questioning is based upon the old behavioral dictum, "*The best predictor of future performance is past*

performance". Questions for this more behaviorally-based interview are developed by analyzing the job and deciding what skills and personal characteristics are needed to perform it well. In this type of interview, you may be asked to describe in detail a prior job or placement, including responsibilities, accomplishments and failures, most and least enjoyable aspects of the job, and reason for leaving. The most difficult aspect of this type of interview is in predicting the questions, and up to half the questions may be somewhat negative in connotation ("*Please tell me a specific incident where you had to work under stress*"; "*Could you relate a project you worked on in which the results did not turn out too well ?*", etc.).

What You Ask an Interviewer

Toward the end of a typical interview, there comes a time where the applicant is given the opportunity to ask questions of the interviewer(s). This is also a tough area for most interviewees. In the desire to make a good impression on the interviewer, many interviewees will either ask no questions, or only ask about salary and benefits for the position. As a job hunter, you must remember that any prospective job must be a two-way fit, meaning not only should you fit the job dimensions, but the job should also fit you. Not fittting the job dimensions will lead to the employer becoming dissatisfied with you. The job not fitting you will lead to you becoming dissatisfied with the job.

There are some questions applicants should ask, and do not, such as "*What is your management philosophy and supervisory style ?*". This question will give you an idea what the interviewer will be like to work with, or work for. You may also want to find out what form the supervision will take, so that you know what degree of autonomy exists, if any. If the position requires, or may require a license to practice, you will need to know if the employer is willing to provide the post-doctoral supervision necessary to qualify for licensure. A good follow-up to

this question is to inquire about the staff turnover rate. As you have already experienced in this job search, jobs in the mental health field are difficult to find. Learning about staff turnover rates may give you some clues as to how well the management philosophy and supervision style has worked at that particular agency/institution. A number of years ago, I interviewed for a position in the Veterans' Administration system. The only interviewer was the department chief, who was late for the interview. He happened to be alone in his office behind closed door at the time I arrived, and the interview did not take place immediately before or after a lunch hour. When he finally opened the door and greeted me, I saw a huge pile of case files on the desk. Sandwiched between the files were three issues of *Playboy* magazine, which now has a flat binding to allow the title of the magazine to be easily read. The interviewer apologized for being late because he was "busy", and gestured at the files, unaware that I could see the magazine bindings. When it got to my turn to ask questions, I asked this person about his supervisory style, and was told, "*My door is always open.....*". My next question was, "*How do I know when I need to come through that door ?*". The interviewer had no reply. It should come as no surprise that the staff turnover rate under this department head was 300% over an eight year period for the particular position I applied.

Another important area to explore is *how many applicants there were for this position* and how many will be interviewed. This question may tell you where you placed in competition for this position. For example, some interviewers may answer that question by stating, "*We received forty applicants, and are interviewing four, and you are the last person we are interviewing.*" This information can potentially suggest you are the *top* candidate for the position (if the position is with a federal, state, county, or other governmental agency, as they tend to interview the best candidate last); or you are the *bottom* candidate for

the position (if the position is with a private for-profit, or even non-profit agencies, as they tend to interview the best candidate first).

You may need to know what *the funding source is for the position* and how stable that funding might be. There are a number of university practice positions that are funded either by internal or external grants, which may be time-limited funding, or funded through fees generated by clients. There are also a number of clinical positions in private settings where one is paid on a straight percentage-basis of billings collected, or situations in which your income may be based upon the percentage of billing collected and an advancement on anticipated collections. This kind of situation can lead to wide fluctuations in monthly income. Where advances on anticipated collections are concerned, you could start each month technically owing the practice money until collections offset the advanced portion of "salary". In addition, it is up to the employee to pay estimated quarterly state, federal, and Social Security "self-employment" taxes.

Another area worth exploring is if this position has a *probationary period*, and if so, the length of that probation. Your follow-up question in this area should involve discovering what role the supervisor takes to help you get through the probationary period. Probationary periods can range anywhere from six months to three years (in the Veterans' Administration system). In the event you are applying for a position in the Veterans' Administration system, you may want to inquire as to employee success rates at making it through the probationary period. In the example already cited above with the Veterans' Administration system position I had applied for, when pressed, the interviewer indicated that in his eight years, no employee ever made it off probationary status. Needless to say, I did not accept this position when an offer of it was made.

The last area you may want to explore is to *ask the interviewer what aspect(s) of the practice they find difficult or had difficulties in adjusting*, which will give

you a better idea what you might be getting yourself into and what potential problem areas may exist.

Summary

To summarize, the following points need to be considered when job hunting for that first professional psychology position:

1) Be willing to go where the jobs are.

2) Learn to use the internet as soon as possible. There are many different job web sites, as well as links to many classified ad sections in newspapers all over the country.

3) Do not send out a variation of your pre-internship vita. Make sure the vita goes through a spell check, and that all information can be verified.

4) Make sure your reference letters are done on agency/institution letterhead and that the type font and pitch are different on each letter.

5) Keep cover letters short. The letter might never be read.

6) The screening and selection process takes time, especially with federal and state agencies. Do not automatically think you are no longer in the running because you have not heard anything in a month or so. Screening and selection of interview candidates can take several months' time.

7) Bring an expanding file folder (with copies of your vita; official transcripts; original letters of reference; special projects

or documents you worked on; copies of presentations and publications; written work performance evaluations; and a writing tablet) to the interview. You may need these items.

8) Do not arrive late for an interview appointment !!!

9) Be yourself during the interview. As much as you want a job, it has to be a two way fit. You must fit the job and the job must fit you.

10) When you have the opportunity to ask questions of the interviewer, make sure to ask about the management philosophy and supervision style; funding sources for the position; probationary period; and any practice difficulties or concerns.

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